

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

**DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU**

---

School of Theology and Seminary Graduate  
Papers/Theses

School of Theology and Seminary

---

4-12-2006

## A Key and Classic Text: Ephesians 5:21-33

Katinka Nadine Ellen Evers

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers)



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Evers, Katinka Nadine Ellen, "A Key and Classic Text: Ephesians 5:21-33" (2006). *School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses*. 2.

[https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot\\_papers/2](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers/2)

This Graduate Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Theology and Seminary at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

A KEY AND CLASSIC TEXT:  
EPHESIANS 5:21-33

by

Katinka Nadine Ellen Evers

29 Kohler Drive  
Mary Esther, FL 32569

A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,  
Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Systematic Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
Saint John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota

April 12, 2006

This Paper was written under the direction of

---

Dr. Charles Bobertz

Katinka Nadine Ellen Evers

has successfully demonstrated the use of

Latin

in this paper.

---

Dr. Charles Bobertz

April 12, 2006

A KEY AND CLASSIC TEXT:  
EPHESIANS 5:21-33

This paper is an exegesis of the difficult pericope of Ephesians 5:21-33, a stumbling block to many, but truly a cornerstone when viewed through Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body. After a brief introduction familiarizing readers with the passage, this paper shows how the section is treated by Patristic authors (with Origen and Saint Jerome as examples), by feminist theologian E. Elizabeth Johnson, and by Peter T. O'Brien (who demonstrates an Evangelical Protestant view). Finally, Pope John Paul II's theology is introduced, along with his concept of mutual submission and his emphasis on the importance of Ephesians 5:21-33. As this pope delves into how the double analogy in this passage illuminates both the relationship of Christ and the Church and the relationship of husbands and wives, he demonstrates the rich theological potential and beauty of this pericope.

*This paper may be duplicated.*

---

Signature of Student Writer

---

Date

## A Key and Classic Text:

## Ephesians 5:21-33

(21) Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. (22) Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. (23) For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. (24) As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. (25) Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her (26) to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, (27) that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (28) So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (29) For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, (30) because we are members of his body. (31) "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." (32) This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church. (33) In any case, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband. (NAB)

This is certainly a difficult pericope for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In many quarters, it is disregarded or ignored as merely a product of the patriarchal society that prevailed in the past and even managed to permeate the Early Church, irrelevant for us now that we know better.<sup>1</sup> Some cite it as a clear example of oppressive patriarchy that infiltrated the Church even in the early stages, causing havoc on future generations of women. They claim it has been used to advocate a slavish passivity in married women who are supposed to allow themselves to be controlled and dominated by their husbands and even to permit spousal abuse.<sup>2</sup> Twisting and distorting passages like this to urge anyone to

---

<sup>1</sup> *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* does not even engage the feminist critique and gives only the most minimal cursory overview of this pericope. It avoids even discussing or mentioning the submission language, preferring instead to introduce the section as a Christianized household code that uses the relationship of Christ and the Church as the motivation and model for relationships between husbands and wives. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 55:27.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Schussler Fiorenza claims that in Christianity, abuse of wives "was explicitly condoned and recommended in legislation with appeal to the household codes." Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992),

remain in an abusive situation is intolerable. However, to skip over this passage of Scripture as merely outdated is also a serious error. It is even more imperative that difficult, controversial passages be mined for their theological riches.

Ephesians itself is often alluded to as one of the deutero-Pauline epistles. However, this designation is not universally accepted.<sup>3</sup> The fact that in the canonical tradition Ephesians is referred to as written by Paul is sufficient reason for referring to the author as “Paul” and presenting it as a legitimate pericope in a “Pauline Tradition” context. This is appropriate in an exegetical work concerned with theological and pastoral implications rather than historical-critical analysis.<sup>4</sup>

The very choice of beginning the pericope with verse 21 rather than verse 22 is itself a decision based on theological and pastoral reasons. The King James Version and commentaries that agree with its line of thinking, as well as many theologians including Karl Rahner,<sup>5</sup> place verse 21 with the preceding verses because it is more literally rendered “submitting” rather than “submit.” On the surface it seems to parallel the “speaking,” “singing,” “chanting,” and “giving thanks” of the previous section.<sup>6</sup> This, in effect, makes the household code seem even harsher towards women. To place verse 21 with the household code rather than with the community exhortations provides a more

---

330-331. However, in his examples (a friar living in the 1400s and a thirteenth century law in France) he does not demonstrate the connection between the terrifying descriptions of permitted spousal abuse and any actual appeal to the household codes.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 620, qtd in John Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries, ed. Morna D. Hooker (New York: Continuum, 2001), 3. In the original sources, statistics concerning the percentage of Biblical scholars who claim that Saint Paul could not have been the author are quoted to convince readers of non-Pauline authorship, rather than as a means to open the door to other possibilities.

<sup>4</sup> Reference to the author of this work will be under the name “Paul” throughout this paper, recognizing that the author according to the dominant view of scholarship, most likely was not “historical Paul.”

<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 419.

acceptable first verse to set a better mood and allows for a reading of the text as encouraging a reciprocal relationship. This decision to begin with verse 21 also has grammatical support. In the Greek, the word for “submit” is only in verse 21, not verse 22, since it grammatically carries over into what follows. An English translation that more effectively demonstrates this phenomenon is, “(21) Submit to each other out of reverence for Christ: (22) wives, to your own husbands as to the Lord...”<sup>7</sup> The Latin Vulgate, and most subsequent translations, simply repeat the verb so-as to keep the meaning clear.<sup>8</sup>

Through the years since this pericope was first written, it has received a great deal of attention and has been dealt with in many ways. In order to find a way to engage the text of this difficult pericope in a manner that is theologically sound, as pastorally sensitive as possible, and meaningful for us today, some knowledge of how it has been viewed in the past is important.

The Early Christians play an integral and foundational role in forming the canon and are an indiscardable aspect of the “living tradition which unceasingly accompanies and guides the Church’s reading and interpretation of Scripture.”<sup>9</sup> The handling of 5:21 in Patristic sources is particularly interesting. Origen treats it in typical fashion, drawing connections among other verses and seeing in it a spiritual/moral lesson about serving others. The treatment of the verse stands alone, ambiguous as to whether it is meant to be

---

<sup>6</sup> Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 256-257 and *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 716-717.

<sup>7</sup> Translation provided by Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 256.

<sup>8</sup> Though, interestingly enough, the Latin Vulgate (translated by Saint Jerome) uses a slightly different word for verse 22 than it uses for verse 21. (21) *subiecti* invicem in timore Christi (22) *mulieres viris suis subditae* sint sicut Domino. The words have slightly different connotations.

<sup>9</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 18 March 1994, available at <<http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PBCINTER.HTM>>.



attached to the verses preceding it or the verses following it.<sup>10</sup> Saint Jerome, however, may surprise readers with his seemingly modern insights. He emphasizes the importance of service by those in more authority including bishops, teachers, and rulers. He makes a clear contrast between this lifestyle of service for Christians in positions of authority and the domination of subjects by those in authority who are not Christians. Then he mentions the possibility of interpreting the verse so that the general notion of being subject to one another is “divided and distributed in the words which follow...so that not only is a wife subject to her husband...but also husbands are to be subject to their wives.”<sup>11</sup>

Both Origen and Saint Jerome move through the rest of the pericope in their commentaries, drawing lessons of a spiritual or moral sense from the passage rather than simply talking about the duties of actual wives as one might expect from male figures in an era steeped in patriarchal sensibilities. Once in a while a passing comment might be one at which we in our culture cringe, but the focus truly seems to be on the spiritual life of the Church and the human soul with practical familial situations given less emphasis, at times as mere examples of spiritual truths. The importance of the theme of purity in the pericope is brought out and developed by both Origen and Saint Jerome. Origen’s purity language leans a bit too far into a Greek philosophical view at the expense of Christianity’s Jewish roots when he proposes that both the husband/wife relationship and the Christ/Church relationship be lived in “a holy, passionless, and sinless manner.”<sup>12</sup> Passion is a key aspect in both Jewish and Christian ways of relating to God, and cannot

---

<sup>10</sup> Ronald E. Heine, *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 231-232.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome’s Commentary on Ephesians, transl. Heine, *Origen and Jerome*, 232.

<sup>12</sup> Origen’s Commentary on Ephesians, transl. Heine, *Origen and Jerome*, 234.

simply be discarded. However, Origen's analogous reading is interesting in the way he talks of spots and wrinkles. A spot is easily enough seen as a blemish, but for him, a wrinkle has an even more intricate meaning than simply another kind of blemish.

"Wrinkles," he says, "are a sign of old age. If someone thus has traces 'of the old man' remaining, who is not always 'being renewed,' this person would be said to be wrinkled in his soul."<sup>13</sup>

True voluntary service is a theme present in Patristic writings and one to which Saint Jerome alludes. He makes a comparison between a woman who calls herself a wife but is truly an adulteress and a group that may claim to be in the Church but does not subject itself to Christ in true obedience. Saint Jerome explains that "no congregation of heretics can be said to be the Church of Christ nor is Christ their head."<sup>14</sup> The life of Christian service must be a true and free choice, not something people are forced into. "Voluntary servitude will be much greater than a will which has been subjected. By its obedience it begins to be equal to, no rather to reduce to servitude, the one who rules it."<sup>15</sup> The writing of a contemporary moral theologian, John Mahoney, can be used to help deepen and clarify this sense of the necessarily voluntary aspect of service and submission that Saint Jerome is referring to. The "will which has been subjected" may be seen as akin to an attitude where God is seen as primarily juridical and law as merely external, making moral initiative something "proceeding from obligation and compulsion laid upon man from outside [himself]."<sup>16</sup> In this world-view, "law is seen as something

---

<sup>13</sup> Origen's references are to Col 3:9-11. The passage is taken from Origen's Commentary on Ephesians, transl. Heine, *Origen and Jerome*, 237.

<sup>14</sup> Jerome's Commentary on Ephesians, transl. Heine, *Origen and Jerome*, 233.

<sup>15</sup> Jerome's Commentary on Ephesians, transl. Heine, *Origen and Jerome*, 234.

<sup>16</sup> John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 254.

external to man's will and as potentially threatening to invade and conquer that will."<sup>17</sup> In this view, human freedom and any source of authority are pitted against one another. It follows that so are Christ and the Church as well as husbands and wives. Subjection becomes a threatening domination from outside, a compulsion that acts independently of and even against one's own will. However, if moral initiative (and likewise voluntary Christian service and loving submission to the other) is seen as not as merely an exterior obligation and compulsion, but rather an impulsion, "an inarticulate force welling up within, as an impelling urge which is not just an 'I ought' but an 'I must' in terms of external expression,"<sup>18</sup> then freedom is retained and nourished in the very act of submission.

The marital relationship section of the household code begins and ends with the concept of fear. Origen talks of this as a "serene fear" which "produces happiness in accordance with the word of God."<sup>19</sup> Saint Jerome distinguishes between the "fear" that wives are called to and the "fear and trembling" Saint Paul links with the servant/master relationship. Rather, this "fear" for wives is more like reverence and not at all a fear of punishment.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Saint Jerome admits,

we must inquire whether wife, and the fear belonging to a wife, is to be understood in a fleshly manner, since wives are frequently found who are much better than their husbands. They rule over them, manage the household, educate the children, and maintain the discipline of the family while the husbands revel and run around with harlots. I leave it to the

---

<sup>17</sup> John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, 229.

<sup>18</sup> John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, 254.

<sup>19</sup> Origen's Commentary on Ephesians, transl. Heine, *Origen and Jerome*, 232.

decision of the readers whether these women ought to rule their husbands or fear them.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, there are many treasures for us to glean from the Scriptural commentary of the Early Church Fathers on this difficult pericope.

In stark contrast to the rich and open-minded commentary of these Patristic writers, *The Women's Biblical Commentary* not surprisingly takes a critical and negative approach toward the whole section. E. Elizabeth Johnson critiques Ephesians for moving away from the metaphor of Israel's experience of God into description of reality, which leads to enormous abuse and "holds up a divine standard for human behavior and thus sets up an unavoidable contradiction when human beings cannot live up to the divine standard."<sup>22</sup> She sees part of the problem in the fact that the author of Ephesians "grounds the institution of marriage not in the social order, but in creation"<sup>23</sup> with the quote from Genesis 2:24. She says the author's images of unity in creation and the Church "are distorted by the imposition of hierarchy in marriage"<sup>24</sup> and that the motivation to contradict Saint Paul's understandings of the relations between men and

---

<sup>20</sup> Although he links this concept of "fear" with the term "reverence," Saint Jerome says that even "reverence" falls short of expressing the full significance of the word. Jerome's Commentary on Ephesians, transl. Heine, *Origen and Jerome*, 242-243.

<sup>21</sup> Jerome's Commentary on Ephesians, transl. Heine, *Origen and Jerome*, 242.

<sup>22</sup> E. Elizabeth Johnson, *The Women's Biblical Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) 431. In making this argument, Johnson seems to be overlooking the fact that as Christians, the call to follow Christ holds all of us to a rather high "divine standard"!

<sup>23</sup> E. Elizabeth Johnson, *The Women's Biblical Commentary*, 431. Whether marriage is understood as part of the created order or as a mere social invention is key in how Ephesians 5:21-33 is viewed. If the former, then this pericope can be seen as a beautiful and positive description. If the latter is one's world-view, then Saint Paul's description of Christian marital relationships, the relationship of Christ and the Church, and so many other aspects of our Christian Tradition cannot be understood as other than oppressive and unnatural.

<sup>24</sup> E. Elizabeth Johnson, *The Women's Biblical Commentary*, 431.

women is a motivation of fear.<sup>25</sup> For her, the author of this offending piece is concerned with the public image of Christians in the same way that public reputation seems to inspire similar household codes in other parts of the New Testament.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to the particular style of feminist viewpoint represented by E. Elizabeth Johnson, an Evangelical Protestant commentary may have a much more positive view of the text. This is certainly the case with Peter T. O' Brien's commentary on Ephesians. Though manifesting a rather moderate sense in his Biblical scholarship, O'Brien seems to lean slightly more toward the Evangelical side of the spectrum. He does not slip into fundamentalism, but remains extraordinarily academic, knowledgeable, and detailed in his exegetical work. In the debate of how to handle verse 21, he presents the interpretation of mutual submission presented by scholars like Saint Jerome and Pope John Paul the Great. However, he ultimately sides with an interpretation of submission to appropriate authorities, not a symmetrical relationship but an ordered one. He compares the admonition to "submit to one another" to other phrases like "slay one another" or "bear one another's burdens," saying that these are clearly not symmetrical or fully reciprocal. He says that the phrase in Revelation "so that men should slay one another"<sup>27</sup> cannot possibly mean that each one killed the other one "at precisely the same time he or

---

<sup>25</sup> Her entire thought process is based on the assumption of non-Pauline authorship of Ephesians. Instead of forcing a need to integrate Ephesians 5:21-33 with the rest of Pauline writing, the idea of non-Pauline authorship of Ephesians creates enough distinction to allow for the contrasting of ideas with no need to harmonize them or view them on the same plane.

<sup>26</sup> Pope John Paul II completely turns around this idea of "fear" in his August 11, 1982 general audience. He makes the issue one of enculturation when he says, "The author of Ephesians does not fear to accept those concepts which were characteristic of the mentality and customs of the times." John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), General Audience of 28 July 1982, (p. 305). This praise visualizes Saint Paul not as fearfully conforming to the pressures of society, but as fearlessly placing his cultural world-views at the service of the Christ he proclaims.

<sup>27</sup> Revelation 6:4

she was killed.”<sup>28</sup> Likewise, “bearing one another’s burdens” does not mean simply exchanging burdens with everyone else, but implies that those who are stronger and more capable should lend a hand to those in need of help. In a similar way, O’Brien sees “submit to one another” as a phrase that does not mean everyone submits equally to everyone else, but an idea that is unpacked and explained in the rest of the household code.<sup>29</sup> O’Brien’s arguments against what he understands as “mutual submission” in favor of an ordered arrangement of “submission to appropriate authorities” do not lead him to giving the “authority” in any relationship a license to any kind of oppressive domination or tyranny.<sup>30</sup> Rather, O’Brien emphasizes that Saint Paul is making an appeal to free and responsible persons, one which “can only be heeded voluntarily, never by the elimination or breaking of the human will, much less by means of a servile submissiveness.”<sup>31</sup>

The recently deceased Pope John Paul II advocates an “interpretation of mutual submission” that differs from Peter O’Brien’s view and is likewise criticized by more fundamentalist claims. The Holy Father looks at Ephesians 5:21-33 through the lens of his personalistic system.<sup>32</sup> Far from dismissing or attempting to avoid this pericope, he

---

<sup>28</sup> Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 403.

<sup>29</sup> Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 403-404.

<sup>30</sup> “The idea of subordination to authority in general, as well as in the family, is out of favour in a world which prizes permissiveness and freedom. Christians are often affected by these attitudes. Subordination smacks of exploitation and oppression that are deeply resented. But authority is not synonymous with tyranny, and submission to which the apostle refers does not imply inferiority.” Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 412.

<sup>31</sup> Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 411-412. This echoes the words of Saint Jerome concerning the necessity of service to be voluntary and the writing of John Mahoney favoring a view of obedience to the law as proceeding from impulsion rather than compulsion.

<sup>32</sup> This personalistic phenomenology is also called his Theology of the Body, and is a theological/philosophical system making use of personalism in a way that some compare in importance and newness adopted to its age to the systems developed by Saint Augustine with his use of Platonic thought and Saint Thomas Aquinas with his incorporation of Aristotle’s philosophy. This over-arching thought can be

engages it carefully and in depth, saying that it cannot be properly or fully understood “except in the full Biblical context, considering it as the crowning of the themes and truths which, through the Word of God revealed in Sacred Scripture, ebb and flow like long waves.”<sup>33</sup> He treats this difficult passage not as a stumbling block, but as “a key and classic text.”<sup>34</sup> It is located in the context of a letter that begins by presenting the plan of salvation in Jesus Christ, moves to the revelation of Christ in the Church, and talks of our unity as “constructed on the multiplicity and diversity of Christ’s gifts.” The general instructions move to more specific descriptions in chapter five where this particular pericope lies.<sup>35</sup> The relationships in Ephesians 5:21-33 are reciprocal and communitarian, flowing from both parties’ common relationship with Christ. This relationship with Christ is one characterized not by fear as a “defensive attitude before the threat of evil,” but by a “respect for holiness.”<sup>36</sup> Aware of modern sensitivities, Pope John Paul II emphatically states that the relationship of husband and wife in this pericope “is not one of one-sided domination.” The admonition to love “makes the husband simultaneously subject to the wife, and thereby subject to the Lord himself.”<sup>37</sup>

Unlike E. Elizabeth Johnson’s lament that Ephesians attempts a description of reality and thus leads to abuses, John Paul the Great classifies the nuptial relationship as an analogy which both illuminates the mystery and is illuminated by the mystery. The

---

applied to more concrete situations, and is noticeable in everything from his personal actions to his social justice encyclicals.

<sup>33</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), General Audience of 28 July 1982, (p. 305).

<sup>34</sup> It seems as if his refusal to treat it as a stumbling block actually keeps it from being one and in treating it in a positive manner, he actually helps it become potentially positive. This quote is in John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 28 July 1982, (305).

<sup>35</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 4 August 1982, (306-309).

<sup>36</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 11 August 1982, (309).

<sup>37</sup> The Holy Father is also fond of calling this mutual submission “reciprocal donation of self.” It is in the total giving of self to the other that each receives. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 11 August 1982, (310).

pope describes the mystery as not simply Christ and the Church, but that of “the eternal love of God for man...which is expressed and is realized in time through the relationship of Christ to the Church.”<sup>38</sup> This is an analogy that operates in two directions. It both helps us to better understand “the essence of the relationship of Christ and the Church” and to “see more deeply into the essence of marriage to which Christians are called.”<sup>39</sup> This joining of the ecclesial and marital relationships in a double-analogy is not at all an arbitrary connection of two autonomous realities. The community of the Church and the community of the family are intrinsically linked on multiple levels. Sacramentally, they are in a particular relationship in that the Church as “in the nature of a sacrament”<sup>40</sup> and the mediating source of all the sacraments, is the mediating source of marriage, the most ancient and indeed primordial sacrament<sup>41</sup> and prototype for all the other sacraments.<sup>42</sup> From a more social model, the ecclesial and familial communities overlap and depend on each other, but the family is appropriately called “the domestic Church” because it

---

<sup>38</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 18 August 1982, (312). This statement is fleshed out to allow a more open view of salvation and particularly to express the continuity between the old and new covenants. This latter expression is accomplished by comparing the spousal analogy between Yahweh and His chosen people Israel often utilized by the Jewish prophets and the spousal analogy of Christ and His Church described in this section of Ephesians. See also John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Apostolic Letter of 15 August 1988, 7.23.

<sup>39</sup> This does not mean that all Christians are called to the particular sacrament of matrimony. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 18 August 1982, (313).

<sup>40</sup> The pope takes care to distinguish “the Church is a sacrament” and “the Church is in the nature of a sacrament” as cited in *Lumen Gentium* 1. The actual text in Latin is, “*Cum autem ecclesia sit in Christo veluti sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum intimae cum Deo unionis totiusque generis humani unitatis...*” as made available in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 849. The key word in this distinction John Paul II makes is *veluti* which can be translated in a number of ways, including ‘as if,’ ‘just as,’ ‘even as,’ ‘as,’ or ‘as for instance.’ Thus, one possible way to translate this section is “Since the Church is in Christ just as a sacrament is, or a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and unity of the whole human race...” (my translation). This translation is similar to the one provided on the Vatican website “Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race...” (available at <[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)>) The translation supplied by Austin Flannery, however, is quite different. “Since the church, in Christ, is a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race...” *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), 1.

<sup>41</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 8 September 1982, (312).



“constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion.”<sup>43</sup> These two intimately connected poles need to balance and complement one another. When the focus is on trying to achieve a deeper understanding of the marital relationship, one must keep in mind that the spousal relationship of Christ to the Church is always the basis on which a true understanding of marriage is formed.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, in any analysis of this passage that finds meaning in the ecclesial dimension of the two-fold analogy, one cannot lose sight of the very real, concrete, and enduring practical application in the lives of married couples.

In regards to the marital dimension of Ephesians 5:21-33, John Paul the Great pastorally counters the negative views of this text as oppressive towards women by emphasizing the dignity of human persons in their femininity and masculinity, a dignity he sees as inherent in this pericope. He explains what he means by the mutual subjection of spouses in some detail in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, particularly emphasizing the duties and responsibilities of husbands in relation to their wives (and indeed of all men regarding women) which may have often escaped due notice in the past. In the love husbands are called to have for their wives, “there is a fundamental affirmation of the woman as a person.”<sup>45</sup> This affirming love of the woman as a person, a subject rather than an object for the man’s self-gratification, creates the condition where “the female personality” can “develop fully and be enriched.”<sup>46</sup> The Holy Father calls special attention to Christ’s attitude toward women as revealing in a particular way His love for all of us.<sup>47</sup> The kenotic giving of himself, even the giving up of his own life, which a husband is called to

---

<sup>42</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 20 October 1982, (339).

<sup>43</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Apostolic Exhortation of 22 November 1991, 3.21.

<sup>44</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 18 August 1982, (313).

<sup>45</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Apostolic Letter of 15 August 1988, 7.24.

do, is also a form of subjection. Likewise, for a wife (and of course for all women in regards to men) her relationship with Christ serves as the motivation for her relationship with her husband. She is called to submit herself to her husband through the gift of herself, as he is called to submit himself to her through the gift of himself in love. Christ is both the source and the model of this reciprocal donation of self for both men and women as both submit to one another out of reverence for Christ according to the analogy of Christ's relationship with the Church.<sup>48</sup>

Another analogy clearly present in this pericope is the analogy of the body and head. The Holy Father calls this a supplementary analogy. The image of the head and body points toward a kind of union that is of an organic nature. Saint Paul is speaking as if the married couple form one organic union, truly becoming "one flesh" as in Genesis 2:24.<sup>49</sup> This is the same kind of understanding that leads to other organic images (like the vine and branches) that speak of an outlook based on community and interrelation rather than an individualistic "sandbox mentality" that sees people more like self-autonomous grains of sand only connected at a superficial level. Unlike the image of a sandbox, the analogy of a head/body relationship fits well with themes of life and growth, which characterize a healthy marriage and a healthy relationship with God. Focusing on the organic nature of the head and body analogy avoids a false dualism that actually betrays the intrinsic nature and purpose of the analogy by pitting the head and body against one another in inequality where one necessarily dominates the other.

---

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Apostolic Letter of 15 August 1988, 7.24.

<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Apostolic Letter of 15 August 1988, 7.25.

<sup>48</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 11 August 1982, (310). For even more practical, concrete examples of mutual submission, particularly on the part of the man, read Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993). A particularly explicit example occurs on page 272.

Pope John Paul the Great is careful in his use of the body and head analogy not to allow it to suggest a union where the two particular subjects in relationship dissolve into one another and cease to be two. Although he does not explicitly state it, the loss of twoness would immediately result in a subsequent loss of true relationship.<sup>50</sup> To maintain this unity of multiplicity, the Holy Father talks in the language of bi-subjectivity. He claims that this bi-subjectivity is manifested in both the Christ/Church relationship and the husband/wife relationship. The two distinct subjects retain their distinctiveness rather than being absorbed into one another. The uni-subjectivity of the two becoming one flesh is itself based on bi-subjectivity.<sup>51</sup>

Like the Patristic writers before him, Pope John Paul II picks up on the metaphors of spots and wrinkles. He talks of spots often being associated with ugliness, while old age and senility are displayed in wrinkles. These, the pope says, are used metaphorically to talk of sin and moral defects. In addition, wrinkles lead to the concept of old age, which he says is associated with sin at the time of Paul. Paul's "old man" in Romans 6:6

---

<sup>49</sup> Of course this analogy also (and even "chiefly" according to John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 25 August 1982, (314).) images the organic union of Christ and the Church.

<sup>50</sup> This statement can be demonstrated by seeing the general principle at work in the relationship of a dance. In interacting on the dance floor, a good couple will in a sense become one. The particular roles of "lead" and "follow" can bring the two partners into an integral complementarity where the two subjects are not lost in the organic oneness that is created. In actuality, the relationship helps them to become not less than themselves, but more truly who they are. On the other hand, if they were to actually meld into one amorphous being with no distinction of lead and follow, then there would no longer truly be a dance, a couple, or unity. Rather, unity is maintained by multiplicity.

<sup>51</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audiences of 25 August 1982 and 1 September 1982, (316-319).

signifies a sinful man.<sup>52</sup> Quite the contrary to this, John Paul the Great states that the Church is eternally young.<sup>53</sup>

Liturgy and the sacraments are of great importance to Pope John Paul II. Reference to the sacrament of matrimony is clear in this pericope,<sup>54</sup> but themes relating to baptism and Eucharist are also present, albeit in “an indirect and, in a certain sense, allusive manner.”<sup>55</sup> Verse 26 talks of Christ handing Himself over to the Church “to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word.”<sup>56</sup> Water and words speak immediately to Christians of the sacrament of baptism, since the matter for that sacrament is water and the form is the words of a Trinitarian credal formula. The difference, however, between our experience of baptism and the meaning in Ephesians is a difference of subject. We experience the particular baptisms of individual members of the Church, while Paul is talking as if the Church as a whole is being baptized. Pope John Paul II bridges this difference in his theology by seeing the spousal love of Christ applied to the whole Church “every time that a single person receives in her the

---

<sup>52</sup> “We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin.” NAB. Obviously, Pope John Paul II is not working from this translation, but the general sense remains. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 1 September 1982, (318).

<sup>53</sup> The deceased pope’s actions at World Youth Days and in other encounters with young people illustrate and reinforce his statement more than any number of documents or theological expositions on the eternal youth of the Church as connected with the younger generations of the faithful and the constant growth and renewal that entails.

<sup>54</sup> Of course the concept of sacrament as it is understood today was not present in the Early Church when Ephesians was actually written. The Greek word *mysterion*, generally translated “mystery,” now was translated “*sacramentum*” in Saint Jerome’s edition of the Latin Vulgate. Ephesians 5:32 could then be used to argue that marriage is a sacrament since “*sacramentum hoc magnum est ego autem dico in Christo et in ecclesia*” seems to be indisputable to the uninformed as clearly referencing a sacrament. Martin Luther accused the Catholic Church of basing her numbering of Matrimony among the sacraments on this “mistranslation” of Ephesians 5:32. Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 316. Pope John Paul II equates the two terms “*mysterion*” (mystery) and “*sacramentum*” (sacrament), enabling this text to retain a sense of affirming marriage as a sacrament in an indirect but “fundamental” way. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 8 September 1982, (323).

<sup>55</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 27 October 1982, (342).

<sup>56</sup> Ephesians 5:26, NAB

fundamental purification by means of baptism.”<sup>57</sup> In this way, the baptized person not only is cleansed from all stain of original sin and brought into membership in the Church, but also becomes a participant in this spousal love relation of Christ and His Church.<sup>58</sup>

This spousal love relationship of Christ and the Church is especially manifested in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The expressions in the text of Ephesians 5:21-33 which refer to the care of the body, particularly verse 29’s language of nourishment/sustenance, are Eucharistic in nature. They not only lead to a sense of the sacredness and dignity of the human body as that which should be cared for and cherished, but suggest “a reference to the Eucharist with which Christ in His spousal love nourishes the Church.”<sup>59</sup> The Genesis passage Saint Paul quotes in the midst of this pericope takes on new and vibrant meaning when seen in the light of the Eucharist. Through this sacrament, in a way that transcends human comprehension, Christ gives Himself to us His Church, and we become one flesh!

The implications of this theology are enormous. A paper of this scope only begins to scratch the surface, yet there are precious and meaningful treasures in this pericope that are pertinent for our society today. When Ephesians 5:21-33 is treated in a manner that remains steadfast in truth, generous in love, and open to the creative work of the Holy Spirit, it will yield a bounty of rich theology that upholds the dignity of every human person and helps us be ever more submissive to the perfect self-giving love of our Heavenly Spouse.

---

<sup>57</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 25 August 1982, (317).

<sup>58</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 25 August 1982, (317).

<sup>59</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 1 September 1982, (321).

## Selected Bibliography

- Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.
- Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. vol. 2. Edited by Norman P. Tanner. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990.
- Fiorenza, Francis Schussler and John P. Galvin. *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*. vol. 2. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Heine, Ronald E. *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- The Interpreter's Bible*. vol. 10. Nashville: Abingdon, 1953.
- John Paul II. *Familiaris Consortio*. Apostolic Exhortation. 22 November 1991.
- John Paul II. *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Apostolic Letter. 15 August 1988.
- John Paul II. *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*. Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997.
- Johnson, E. Elizabeth. *The Women's Biblical Commentary*. Edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.
- Mahoney, John. *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Muddiman, John. *The Epistle to the Ephesians*. Black's New Testament Commentaries. Edited by Morna D. Hooker. New York: Continuum, 2001.
- The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990.
- O'Brien, Peter. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999.
- Pontifical Biblical Commission. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. 18 March 1994.
- Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith*. Translated by William V. Dych. New York: Crossroad, 1978.
- Wojtyla, Karol. *Love and Responsibility*. Translated by H. T. Willetts. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993.